

Kentucky Native American Myths and Stereotypes

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With regard to Native American history in Kentucky, four main myths and stereotypes need to be dispelled so that the public can better understand Kentucky's history in a truer light.

MYTH:

Native groups never lived permanently in Kentucky. This country was used only as a hunting ground.

FACT:

Kentucky had been permanently inhabited for thousands of years before Europeans or Africans ever arrived on this continent. Native people were the first Kentuckians, arriving in the Ohio Valley more than 12,000 years ago. This was not just land used for hunting. Archaeological evidence from every county in the Commonwealth gives evidence to locations of camps and villages built in the same places over a span of hundreds and thousands of years. By A.D. 1000, native people were farmers who lived in large villages in the summer and often moved to smaller hunting camps in winter. By the 1700s, Euro-American diseases had reduced native populations by over half. Some groups completely disappeared due to these diseases, while the survivors joined with the remnants of other groups to form new societies.

In addition, because of the fear of reprisals from the English after the French and Indian war, the inhabitants of some towns that remained in northern Kentucky moved to establish their permanent summer villages further north, in what is now Ohio. However, they continued to disperse into smaller groups during the fall and winter to collect nuts and hunt in their traditional lands. This native practice of establishing winter hunting camps could have led to the interpretation that indigenous groups only hunted in Kentucky. While it is true that few or no permanent Indian settlements remained in central Kentucky when Euro-American settlers arrived here in the 1770s, Indian communities may have remained in more remote or less-traveled areas of the state long after communities in more hospitable locations had been abandoned.

MYTH:

Native people were "savages" or "children of nature."

FACT:

American Indians encountered by the first Europeans were not savage, dull and brutish, nor did they live a marginal, "primitive" life. This stereotype makes it difficult for many people to believe that Kentucky's native people or their ancestors are worthy of our cultural respect. In fact, these Indians were village farmers. In summer they lived in permanent villages along major waterways with fields of corn, beans, squash and tobacco surrounding them. Men hunted and women tended the crops and collected nuts and wild plants for food and medicine. These people used bows and arrows, produced pottery, wove fabrics and participated in long-distance trade

with other native groups both north and south, and they had a rich ceremonial life. This way of life differed greatly from Europeans, but a different lifestyle does not justify describing native ways of life as “inferior.”

MYTH:

Great earthen mounds in Kentucky were not constructed by the ancestors of the American Indians that early settlers first encountered

FACT:

Two hundred years ago, Americans could not believe that the American Indians they met and interacted with had ever possessed the engineering and administrative skills needed to build mounds. Similarly, they did not think that American Indians could have been responsible for the finely crafted objects recovered from these mounds. So to explain the mounds, Americans speculated that a unified and civilized race – far superior to the Indians – had once ruled an empire in the Ohio Valley. This is known as “The Myth of the Moundbuilders.”

Different types of mounds were built in Kentucky beginning around 500-400 B.C. through about 1400 A.D. In the 1800s the origins of the builders were unknown but were attributed to a group of people who preceded those encountered by early settlers. Nineteenth century stereotypes promoted the Moundbuilders as much more advanced in art, civilization and knowledge than the present occupants of the land. Euro-Americans considered the Moundbuilder civilization to have been annihilated by the American Indians. Today we know that the great earthen mounds in Kentucky and elsewhere in the Woodlands east of the Mississippi River were constructed by the ancestors of the American Indians that early settlers encountered.

MYTH:

All native people shared a similar way of life.

FACT:

Native American ways of life are as different from each other as European ways of life. The stereotype is that all American Indians hunted buffalo, carved totem poles, lived in tipis, ate corn and fought constantly. This is a combination of characteristics of hundreds of Native American groups from different geographic regions and time periods inaccurately blended into a “generic” Indian culture. Life in one geographic area differed greatly from that in another. There were apartment-dwelling farmers in the Southwest, coastal fishing groups in the Pacific Northwest, and nomadic hunters in the Great Plains. While it is true that people living in the same geographic area had similar ways of life, customs and language could differ greatly. There were and continue to be many diverse Native American Indian ways of life.